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# Montreal Modern: Retro Culture and the Modern Past in Montreal

By Kristian Handberg

## Abstract

Through analyses of the retro scenes in Montreal, Canada, the article discusses retro culture's role as cultural memory. It is shown how Montreal's cultural identity is formed by memories of modern culture such as the Red-light and Sin City reputation of the illicit nightlife of the 1940s and 1950s, and the space age modernism of the 1960s following the Expo 67 and Quebec's Quiet Revolution. This is reflected in the city's thriving retro culture through the study of two groups of retro shops. In circulating specific memories and objects in a specific context, retro is an important negotiation of the past in the present. Especially, it is stated that the retro culture displays "local accents" and a new focus on the specificities of modern culture giving a revaluation to a previously overlooked identity such as the *Quebecité*.

**Keywords:** Retro, cultural memory, material culture, second-hand culture, Canadian culture, kitsch, subculture, popular culture

## Introduction

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century modernity as past has captured our fascination through the popularity of *retro*: the dedicated revival of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in looks and things, most often from the period between 1950 and 1980. Being grounded in popular culture and the recent past, retro differs from previous revivals and historicisms with their focus on distant, idealized pasts through high culture. When “retro” was first encountered in the 1970s and 1980s (according to design historian Elizabeth Guffey the term retro was first used in the early 1970s in connection with the controversial French fashion inspired by the World War II years known as *mode retro* (Guffey 2006)), it was associated with a postmodern lack of historical meaning as a play of surface and rootless cannibalism of all things past, expressed by Fredric Jameson (1984) and Jean Baudrillard (1981). While retro often involves a play of surfaces and its popularity often leads to some degree of commercial consumption as approach to history, I will state that retro is also an elaborate work of cultural memory creating a common past and a cultural identity. And it should be noted that retro is based on specific objects from a specific past, *Visst. Men vill du* and is always practiced in a specific context.

In this article, I will show how retro culture in Montreal contributes to the consciousness of the city’s cultural identity and history, and how regional specificity interacts with international influence in the formation of contemporary cultural identity via retro. In particular I will focus on how two conceptions of the “20<sup>th</sup> century modern” are present in the retro culture in Montreal: the raw and seedy red light past of the city’s notorious “wide-open” years of the 1940s and 1950s and the forward-looking space age modernism of the following period with the Expo 67 World Exposition as a key symbol. These mythical epochs work as symbolic universes for the current retro culture - referred to in a number of things and practices working with history through affects in the way described by Pierre Nora in his *Lieu de Mémoire* thinking. Furthermore, I will refer to Swedish ethnographer Orvar Löfgren’s research in the regional and national specificity in modern material culture as a productive understanding of the current retro culture. As retro is becoming an accessible and widely distributed fashion, it is simultaneously developing more specialized and dedicated forms that play a greater role in the collective and individual identity formation.

I return to these theories in the final discussion after presenting the context of Montreal and going through the case of the retro culture here with a study of two scenes of retro shops based on research conducted in 2012. I should underline that my study is not an anthropological field study, a sociological analysis, or, a business study of the retro trade. Instead it is a cultural study of retro based on observations of the contemporary cultural practices and studies of the cultural historical background.

## Montreal's Modern Past

Even though Montreal is an old city by North American standards, founded by French settlers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, its identity as “Quebec’s Metropolis” and the capital of culture and nightlife in Canada is defined by its modern history with a prominent modern mythology in both the daylight and nightlife side of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity. Contrasting the flexibility (or “emptiness”) of the Canadian cultural identity as such (i.e. Keohane 1997), Quebec identity is highly contested, with independence being on the political agenda, as it is the stated goal of the Parti Quebecois, which has governed the province at several times. Following centuries of colonial and English dominance of the French, the recent past contains a dramatic struggle for political and cultural autonomy and recognition, and a late and abrupt way into modernity.

Quebecois culture was secluded until far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, generally considered as closed around tradition and rural life with the Catholic Church as the only center of intellectual and cultural affairs, which promoted an anti-modern and morally strict worldview. The backwardness and conservatism continued under the strict and regressive rule of Premier Minister Maurice Duplessis (1890-1959), who governed the province from 1936-1939 and 1944-1959. This period is even known as “Le Grand Noirceur” (*The Great Darkness*), with limited social rights, political corruption and the persecution of unions and alternative forms of thought or political organization.

Paradoxically, Montreal was, in these very years in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, known as a notorious, wide-open city of vice, as vividly described in William Weintraub’s *City Unique: Montreal Days and Nights in the 1940s and 1950s* (1996/2004). Fuelled by events such as the US prohibition era (1920-33) and the many soldiers serving in the WWII, drinking, gambling and prostitution were a dominating force in the city’s life and reputation (together with a scene of nightclubs, music and entertainment) supported by a notoriously corrupt police force and city government. Thus, the 1950s in Montreal has conventionally been inscribed in the collective memory as a dark, pre-modern era, but also with an undercurrent of modern vices and entertainment giving it a certain attraction. The 1950s is also associated with the introduction of American consumption objects and popular culture, which were looked upon with concern both by the Anglophone urban cultural elite and Francophone religious authorities.

Against this background, the 1960s became a “familiar narrative of Montreal’s modernization” (Straw 1992: 6), which saw an active self-reimagining as “a serious self-conscious city so different from the jaunty, rakish church-and-nightclub town it used to be” (Weintraub 2004: 273), moving from chaos and corruption to modern cosmopolitanism through urban renewal and replacing rural traditionalism with urban modernism.



Montreal as a neon-lit “wide-open city”. Postcard from 1952.  
Expo 67, Postcard. Picture: Kristian Handberg with thanks to Johanne Sloan.

The Category One World Exposition Expo 67 in Montreal 1967 contained most of these themes being a successful and utterly forward-looking world’s fair. It had monorails and multi-screen projections and presented Canada’s provinces and the rest of the world in cool modernist pavilions, with Buckminster Fuller’s dome for the American pavilion as a landmark (see illustrations). As Rhona Richman Kenneally and Johanne Sloan write in their recent anthology on the event, “Expo brought art, architecture, design, fashion and technology together into a glittering, modern package”, where “almost every pavilion was striking for its modern-looking appearance”, with “modernism itself as a lingua franca of Expo 67 seemingly capable of traversing borders, nationalities and even ideologies” (Kenneally & Sloan 2010: 11). Expo was a successful operation for its Canadian, Quebecois and Montreal organizers as a manifestation of the modernity and progress of the 1960s (“So much of it avowedly, almost giddisly, futuristic” (Lownsbrough 2012: 7)) even though, according to Lownsbrough, there is indeed “something slightly ‘square’ of the earnestness of Expo” (ibid.) and its giddy futurism from the point of view of a more critically-minded present generation. But in the 1960s it was an ideal *materialization* of the modern, also for the troubled city of Montreal for which it worked as a “glorified alter-ego” (ibid.) built on new artificial islands in the St. Lawrence River. Expo 67 gave the city a new identity manifestly modern and in opposition to its previous reputation. Kenneally and Sloan suggest that: “Expo 67 can be seen as a kind of utopic urban satellite in opposition to the wider municipality that fed and sustained it – a municipality that, despite the intentions of Mayor Jean Drapeau to sanitize Montreal’s street scene by sweeping its detritus (human and otherwise) under the rug for the visitors, maintained a seamy side commensurate with its reputation for the hedonistic activities” (Kenneally & Sloan 2010: 17).

According to this widely circulated collective memory, we can see Expo as expressing one modern myth, the Apollonian, in contrast to the seedy Dionysian night-life mythology of red light Montreal. Both are cornerstones in conceptions of popular modernity and its special meanings in and for Montreal. They appear as strong poles in the city’s cultural memory, and they also have a significant

presence in the retro culture as the following analysis will show. Like elsewhere in the Western world, the post-war decades were an important and formative period in Montreal and Quebec, but in a spectacular way the epoch was here framed by the eye-catching images of the Red-lights Fifties and the Expo Sixties.

## Quebecité in Modern Culture

For Quebec, Expo was an entrance into the modern world, catching up with the modern world in a cosmopolitan and universal modernist style that was removed from the inferiority, lowness and provincialism often associated with the *Quebecité*. In her study *National Performance: Representing Quebec from Expo 67 to Céline Dion* (2011), theatre and performance historian Erin Hurley writes about the cultural performances of a Quebec identity that at the time of the Expo was marked by an “urgent construction of a Quebec national project” (Hurley 2011). Cultural manifestations were especially important for Quebec, since it “[l]ike other nations without a state ... relies upon cultural production to vouch its national status” (Hurley 2011: 18). But determining what defines and matters as Quebecois culture is often difficult in an affluent postcolonial society that is heavily influenced by the high culture of the Old World and the popular culture of the USA. This is also the case for Canadian culture in general, as “Canada is one of those mid-sized countries, like Australia, which, while developed and prosperous, nevertheless devote their cultural life to artefacts which they do not produce” in the words of media scholar Will Straw (1999: 4-5).

With no celebrated authentic tradition and a modernity that has for long been in the shadows, Quebecois culture concerns “finely grained attributions of *quebecité*” (Hurley 2011) in translations of other cultures (Simon 2006), in accents, in hybrids and combinations often in ordinary, vernacular material far away from appraisal from official institutions. One example is the distinctly local *Joual* dialect, an “English-infected sociolect” of “Quebecois French with urban influences” (Hurley 2011: 74) spoken in Montreal working-class neighbourhoods. Another Quebecois notion is the term *quéétaine* (sometimes *kétaine*) – a negatively laden statement applied to tasteless objects emblematic of cultural poverty, such as a flower-covered shower cap or the Elvis imitating protagonist in the popular Quebecois comedies *Elvis Gratton* (1981-). According to Bill Marshall, “*Le quéétaine* is the visual and iconographic equivalent of *joual*, culturally delegitimized Anglo-French hybrid of borrowings and copies.” (Marshall 2001: 189). It is a recent concept dating from the 1960s with various myths of origin.<sup>1</sup> Bad taste and backwardness are the main features of *quéétaine*, though it is still (like kitsch in the Greenbergian understanding) a product of modernity and mass-production. During my study of the kitsch-cultivating spheres of retro culture, nobody wanted to associate their practice with *quéétaine*. This indicates that embarrassment and negative connotations are still associated with the term: *Quéétaine* is the negative



twin of retro's knowing distinction with its failed backwardness and bad taste without forgoing irony and, maybe, with a too local flavour.

The presence of these concepts is important for understanding the character of modern Quebecité. Quebec is in an active process of national manifestation, for example with a new national library in Montreal, a national art museum in Quebec, and countless festivals and events. At the same time, however, a feeling of inferiority clings to Quebecité: that of being a dominated lower class majority with (or characterised by) cultural poverty, and not even in possession of an "authentic" identity in Montreal, against (or "given"?) the constant preference for the high culture of the Old World and the popular culture of the USA.

In my analysis I will suggest understanding retro as a response to this status by recognising it as a modern local identity, made of popular culture and its objects, and including its imports and accents. Works of high culture, such as contemporary art, sometimes take in objects of québécoise as an ironic celebration of kitsch or as symbols of the cultural underbelly. Breaking somewhat with these ironic and distanced depictions, retro, through its connoisseurship and its aesthetic and historicizing investment, offers a way of rehabilitating and revaluing the past. This of course also includes a vast degree of selection and myth-making, and it has the incentive of aesthetics and lifestyle rather than of a historiographical inquiry. Still, retro is a thorough investigation of the recent past often recognizing the finely grained attributions of Quebecité and giving a consistent reinterpretation of the local identity.

To conclude, Quebecité, and to a certain degree Canadianness as such, are conventionally undefined and lowly valued cultural identities. Even though the Quebec identity has been given a new political focus in recent years, it is still contested and surrounded by uncertainty. And not everybody agrees with the promoted images of Quebecité. This is the case especially in a big city like Montreal, which contains many identities and a complex cultural memory. Expo 67 offered a cosmopolitan identity in its universal modernism that was promoted, was successful for a number of years, and stands as a positive memory for many. However, similar aspirations for a unifying event with the 1976 Summer Olympics turned out as a financial disaster bringing the city to face constant debts and a state of disrepair to many of the prestige buildings from the 1960s. Political and cultural divisions have also characterized the city and made a uniform identity difficult. My analysis discusses how retro reacts to this complex status constructing a Montreal identity by using the specificity of material things and memories.

## **Retro Scenes and Circulations**

Retro's multilayered character going beyond conventional cultural forms and genre borders calls for specific concepts to describe it. One such concept is that of *scene*. A "scene" can be something very local as well as describing a specific

phenomenon of global extent and can generally be defined as “particular clusters of social and cultural activity” (Straw 2005: 412). Scenes are “elusive, hugely attractive, accessible only to those who have qualifications to find it and describe it” (Allan Blum in Simon 2006: 34). Scenes come and go, are “volatile and ephemeral” and “strongly imbricated with urban life” (ibid.). For the study of retro culture, the scene ties together different places and practices such as the shops and markets where retro objects are purchased, the events where they are shown, and the knowledge and aesthetic preferences that unite the practitioners. As a concept it is less fixed and theoretically troubled than the notions of subculture or popular culture and contains different levels of participation and commitment. The scene also includes the “non-human actors” such as material objects and the geographical setting and the human interactions with these, rather than the sole human-based agency sometimes associated with the concepts of culture.

Some retro scenes form a coherent whole, like the one devoted to 1950s rockabilly culture, which, apart from the music, involves clothing, styling, cars and body culture, such as tattoos and burlesque dancing (see *Rockabilly 514*, a documentary on the rockabilly scene in Montreal). Others concentrate on a specific genre (collecting Quebec 1960s Yé-yé records, for example) or casual retro references in fashion and pop culture. Montreal has a proportionally big and conspicuous system of scenes for retro culture, corresponding to the city’s status as a centre for arts, creative industries and education. For this study, I have chosen to focus on some easily identifiable and accessible sites in the form of two groups of retro shops. These are obvious centers in the circulation of retro and demonstrate the current demand for, and valuation of, retro objects. Their abundant presence shows the popularity of retro and an availability that reaches beyond small, exclusive scenes and the scavenging of cheap objects.

Another important concept is circulation. Retro implies a new status for its objects, for instance when an old thing is used in a new way, or, when an old image is applied to a newly produced thing. Retro is a phase in an object’s circulation and in its biography (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986) and not an end station. The image of the door used by Kevin Hetherington in his discussion of disposal ritual is useful (2005). Things might go in and out of the door as retro, and the room of retro may be experienced as open or as closed. Similarly, the rubbish theory of Michael Thompson (1979) illustrates the life-cycles and circulations of things notably observing that the material life cycle of things typically endures their economic value.

The city is often associated with the accelerated circulation of contemporary life and the distribution of new things. But, as Straw shows in the article “Spectacles of Waste” (2009), the city is also characterized by the accumulation and circulation of the past and its artifacts giving it a character of “slowness”, as “a space in which artifacts and other historical residues are stored, and in which movement is blocked” (Straw 2009: 195). “The city is a machine for delay in part through its



capacities for storage, through the spaces for accumulation (like pawnshops and used book stores) that take shape and proliferate within it” (ibid.). Retro takes shape and proliferate from the city’s delay and accumulation of past. This happens through material objects being kept in the archive status of bargain shops and attics, as well as through narratives and memories circulating in the city such as the stories and the cultural memory of Montreal’s red light district in the 1950s, or, the memory of a particular used-record store such as the one Straw himself remembers in “Spectacles of Waste”. Thus, I will claim that retro can be productively understood as a circulation of things as well as of memory.

## The Retro Shops on the Main

Two remarkable clusters of retro shops are located in the Eastern part of Montreal, forming visible scenes of retro culture: Retro clothing and objects on the hip “alternative main street” of Boulevard St-Laurent and furniture and design in the more retracted Rue Amherst. These two groups show different kinds of retro practice, responding to different imagined pasts, corresponding with the aforementioned mythologies of the Montreal past.

St. Laurent Boulevard (“The Main”) hosts many retro-related shops along its length, with a concentration of the most pronounced shops door to door in the middle of the trendy Plateau area such as Kitsch’n Swell, Rokokonut, Friperie St-Laurent and Cul-de-Sac Vintage, and the design shop Montrealité. St. Laurent is a lively “party street” with a historical multicultural flavour and a contemporary hipness associated with it. Thus it is not surprising that these shops are colourful, eye-catching, and accessible in their well-ordered display of goods, thereby aiming at an outgoing and casual audience, as well as the dedicated connoisseurs. Some of the shops are mainly selling clothing (and are locally called *Friperies*), whereas others are focused on design objects, accessories and all kinds of period pieces.

As an example of the retro clothing shops, Friperie St. Laurent is a boutique offering men’s and women’s clothing in about the same amount. The oldest object, a black smoking jacket, dates from 1908, but the main supply obviously dates from the 1940s to the 1980s. The shop’s owner refers to 1950s clothes as the most popular even if they are hard to obtain from store houses and markets in Montreal and Quebec, where they pick their supplies (they underline that they find all things themselves – and do not get it from third-party sellers).<sup>2</sup> The customers are collectors as well as casual *fashionistas* often coming to the St. Laurent-street for the vintage shops. A Montreal guide describes the Friperie St. Laurent as “one of Montreal’s better known shopping destinations”,<sup>3</sup> and according to the owners, it was the first of the St. Laurent vintage clothing shops to open (in 1994). The market is described as being especially hot in the last five years as the number of shops in the street has increased. This has made the street come to be associated

with retro and thus assume the character of a scene. The displays of clothes are accompanied by period piece decorations like an entire display of kitschy Canadian souvenirs. This is the typical aesthetics of the retro boutique, putting equal focus on fashion and connoisseurship. The decoration also expresses a local character in which Quebecité is an advantage rather than a disadvantage. A remarkable presence is several men's shirts still in factory packaging from the textile factories that dominated this very area until a few decades ago. A more exaggerated regional symbol is a robe (possibly from the 1950s) with the red and white maple leaves of the Canadian flag. In this manner, the shop seems characteristic of the retro demand in general, but locally coloured pieces are conspicuous.

Rokokonut is a prominent retro object shop which offers a highly staged form of display starting with the colourful facade. All kinds of objects, from clothing via lamps, glasses and souvenirs to vintage Playboy magazines are for sale with no clear borders between the decorations and the commodities. Leopard patterned tapestry and red lights provide the background for campy objects such as exotic fans, ballerina dolls, cocktail glasses, leather boots, handbags and flowered dresses. The shop highlights the spectacular and exaggerated with the exotic as a common denominator, highlighting the contrasts between local rural kitsch and Far-East or Polynesian exotic, the sexualized erotica of playboy magazines and religious kitsch such as Jesus pictures, boudoir kitsch belonging in a feminine universe and macho "stag" material. Here we are in the realm of a campy ironic retro that nevertheless cares for the individual objects which are all marked with a label of origin and decade (i.e. "Montreal, 1950s").



Kitsch'n Swell.

Photo: <http://inthemoodfortrend.blogspot.dk/2011/05/taste-of-vintage-kitsch.html>

A similar approach is taken by the neighbouring Kitsch'n Swell shop run by the same owners. It opened five years ago, and added Rokokonut two years later meeting a current rising demand for their retro supply – and possibly for creating

another retro universe. Kitsch'n Swell has an interior of wood panelling and a more conventional, homely kitsch style than the queer camp of Rokokonut. This universe is given a distinctively local character through objects such as a characteristic sign from Montreal beer Molson (which is described as very recognizable for Montrealers), Quebec number-plates, souvenirs from local sights, a wooden silhouette of Quebec, and more implicitly through locally popular fake-Indian woodcarvings, silk-paintings and Elvis-objects. Elvis has a notorious popularity in Quebec already recognized in the *Elvis Gratton* TV and film series (1981-) about the eponymous and definitively *québécoise* Elvis impersonator (Marshall 2001). Reflecting this, Kitsch'n Swell offers Elvis as silk-painting, original 70s busts and as especially emblematic in fake wood, uniting many features of Quebec kitsch.



Elvis á la Quebec in fake wood in the Kitsch'n Swell shop. Photo: Kristian Handberg.

The owners (a couple who are dressed in retro clothing and obviously participate in the rockabilly scene as seen in the *Rockabilly 514* movie) refer to the 1950s as the current trend, and the shop has seemingly visualized the current version of Fiftiesness. According to FASHION Magazine writer Ashley Joseph, the shop “feels like entering a 1950s time capsule, or maybe your grandparents’ Florida condo. The vibe is Rockabilly meets 50s housewife, filled with Elvis memorabilia, rotary phones, fringe lamps, religious wall art, suitcases and old Mad Magazines”.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the sister store Rokokonut “satisfies more feminine sensibilities with delicate lace gloves, gilded cigarette cases, vintage lingerie, and fur stoles aplenty – basically everything to make a Mad Men maniac go, well, mad”. This expresses the careful selection of components in the construction of a Fiftiesness

image (even though *Mad Men* is set in the 1960s it is popularly associated with Fiftiness), but also the presence of local objects and specific meanings in such a dedicatedly collected retro image. Accordingly, Kitsch and Swell has the slogan “Not made in China” on its façade to emphasize the provenance of its objects.

A different presence of local symbols in a retro discourse becomes evident in the neighbouring design boutique *Montrealité*. It offers a selection of clothing, bags, and badges with motifs of modern Montreal icons, such as the Farine Five Roses sign (from the abandoned but still iconic flour factory of that name by Montreal’s harbour), the Place Ville-Marie skyscraper, the Habitat 67 and Buckminster-Fuller’s American pavilion from Expo 67. Another design is the downward-pointing arrow logo of the Montreal metro turned 90 degrees to the left, now pointing backwards with ‘Metro’ changed to ‘Retro’! *Montrealité* is run by five designers who started out by selling these things in other shops and at fairs but due to a great demand, they have now been able to open this shop. The newly produced objects here are of course not old, authentic objects like in the neighbouring shops. Whereas these offer pieces from the actual past, *Montrealité* constructs idealized retro: what the past cannot actually offer. The badges and t-shirts recirculate images and collective memories of Montreal, making them symbols of distinction and a knowing alternative to banal souvenirs or megabrands.



Badges from *Montrealité*, Boulevard St. Laurent. Photo: Kristian Handberg.

Of course, *Montrealité*’s products to some degree possess a souvenir character being accessible to the casual visitor (to the retro scene as well as to the city). And indeed the whole group of shops express accessibility and humour, making them available for a broader and casual audience. In addition, there are no signs of the shops being excluded from connoisseur or subcultural circles, as the presence of stalls from the shops on the rockabilly scene and at vintage collector events, and posters in the shops testify. Instead they seem to be the most visible flagships of a

larger scene, which count many smaller fripperies and retro shops, especially in the Plateau area (one example being Retrocité set up by a new distributor in a smaller, distantly located street). This indicates a resonance for retro circulation that fits well with the status of this area as a self-styled “alternative” quarter, “inscribing the alternative into location”, as Gregson and Crewe describe the preferred settings of retro boutiques (Gregson & Crewe 2003: 34). It is also in this geography that many retro-related events take place such as concerts and fairs showing the imbrication of the scene into the local urban life.

With respect to the actual retro objects (that are carefully selected and displayed) on sale in the shops, I will conclude with two observations. The first concerns the presence of the exotic, kinky, quirky and kitschy elements of the past, connoting an ironic connoisseurship today – associated with a younger outgoing audience, compared to the more restrained and expensive retro, closer to conventional good taste described in the following case on the Amherst Street shops. The second concerns the presence of local and regional connotations, from mass-produced woodcarvings to Farine Five Roses, as retro icons. This can be seen as an expression of the “cultural thickenings of belonging” in the regional differences in materialities of everyday life commodities described by Löfgren further discussed below. It gives meaning to the retro object when it connotes a Montreal or Quebec 1950s identity compared to simply *Fiftiesness* in a general, often more American way. This is, of course, also a way for the retro connoisseur to perform his or her distinction and knowingness with a conscious accent claiming some kind of cultural belonging, or at least historical consciousness, in the ironic retro quoting.

Furthermore, I would argue that the choice of 1950s objects – with in one category a kitschy, rural homeliness (wooden tree objects, flowery dresses, religious objects), and in another a queer, burlesque seediness (old Playboy magazines, bar glasses, leopard-skin tapestry) – could be seen as setting up a symbolic universe corresponding to certain ideas of Montreal and Quebec’s past: the anti-modern rural Quebec and the vice city Montreal. Both these symbolic universes possess a definite otherness from the late modern present, making up a temporal district of exotic entertainment. In other words, the Montreal Fiftiesness contains the special elements of the kitschy homeliness of rural Quebec and the seedy vice of pre-modernization Montreal.

## **Selling Montreal Modern in Rue Amherst**

Rue Amherst is a street well into the Eastern part of town, an old working-class district that is still not considered gentrified, and located far away from the usual shopping and sightseeing districts. During the last decade, this street has become a remarkable centre for expensive vintage furniture with around a dozen shops dedicated to selling second-hand 20<sup>th</sup> century objects. The first shops opened around



20 years ago, and in the last five years, the market has been particularly hot for these modern antiquities, especially Scandinavian Modern-inspired design from the 1940s to the 1960s, often labelled “Mid-century modern”.

The little boutique Mtlmodern is typical of the aesthetics of this scene. Mtlmodern was founded in 2001 by a retro collector and presents itself as a “Montreal based resource of classic mid-20th century design”. The small shop is packed with pieces of furniture that are restored in the workshop in the back. The shop’s focus is obviously classic wooden mid-century furniture: Vintage fashion, where *The Chair* by Hans Wegner is dealt at the expensive price of \$ 1750. The teak craze is even mirrored in the shop’s emblem on its business cards, which is a teak surface, and the name of the shop indicates a special cohesion between Montreal and the ‘modern style’ that is proclaimed several times in the street.

A similar supply is found in PEI Mobilier Moderne 20e Siècle just around the corner, which was also started by a young retro design collector. The shop is set up in a carefully restored workshop with brick walls and a concrete floor. Antiques and Curiosa, which opened 12 years ago, presents a wide selection of teak furniture on its floor and a complimentary selection of lamps hanging from its ceiling. Its owner confirms the interest in Danish Modern, and he is able to show original 1960s brochures from several Danish manufacturers. Next door, Cité Déco was among the first in the street, opening 20 years ago. It presents a smaller selection of pieces accompanied by artworks from the same period. According to its presentation, Cité Déco offers “vintage furniture from the 20s to the 80s”: a period that frames popular modernism with an emphasis on mid-century Modern. Contrary to the cave-like darkness and colored lights in the St.Laurent shops, these shops are bright and spacious, creating a more exclusive focus on the objects.



Scandinavian Modern at PEI. Photo: Kristian Handberg.”

Hans J. Wegner chair sold for 1750 \$ at Mtl Modern in rue Amherst. Photo: Kristian Handberg.



The biggest among the shops is Jack's Objects et Mobiliers Modernes du XXe Siècle. The typography of the logo is grossly 1970s, and its supply accordingly involves more 1970s chrome and plastic, and less 1950s teak, including kitsch objects that could also be encountered in Kitsch'n Swell. When asked about popular objects, the shop's owner says that people often like to combine Scandinavian Modern pieces with other objects, like a 1970s lamp or an exotica object. Other shops indicate that retro furniture can be combined with contemporary elements far from cheap kitsch, for example in Re Design (co-operated with Cité Déco). Here, vintage furniture is displayed together with exclusive contemporary design and art expressing a conventional, cultivated taste rather than a bohemian alternative style.

And generally, the scene of shops in Rue Amherst express a reinterpretation of retro, from an ironic anti-fashion into a smooth and affluent fashion for a more well-off audience of connoisseurs. The connection to a subcultural scene and an alternative, oppositional self-understanding is subdued here, compared to the shops at St-Laurent. As such, Rue Amherst states the new popularity of retro.

Besides this general tendency, however, the shops also display some specific characteristics oriented towards the local context. For example, the Expo 67 has a remarkable presence in Rue Amherst. At Seconde Chance, a big selection of Expo 67 related objects even forms a special exhibition in the window display. The owner refers to all things Expo-related as garnering huge interest from specialist collectors as well as a general retro audience, and quickly goes on to talk about the general importance of the Expo for Montreal and the vintage things to be found here: "Expo meant everything. The world came to Montreal and stayed there. Montrealers got a taste for foreign food and for modern design that instantly got popular. National retailers had to run a different selection of furniture in Quebec than in the rest of Canada because of the demand for modern design with bright orange shapes, and so on".<sup>5</sup> There is also a selection of Expo 67 materials in the store le 1863, and here the owner also refers to it as a key event. The modern designers came to Montreal, and the demand for the new look corresponded with the Quiet Revolution<sup>6</sup> and the general feeling of the new in the 1960s with rock and counter-culture. The Expo featured a popular concert programme, which brought countercultural idols like Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead to Montreal, even though some student groups also protested against the exhibition. The other distributors in Rue Amherst also refer to Expo 67 often and put any related objects on prominent display. It is obvious that Expo is a living and attractive memory site, nurtured by many kinds of objects in established collector fields like postcards and coins, as well as fashionable vintage objects like a boomerang shaped ashtray. In the collective memory, Expo 67 stands as a pinnacle of the generally popular post-war modernity, even bridging the restrained Scandinavian Modern high modernism of the 1950s and early 1960s, with the psychedelic style

of the youth rebellion of the late 1960s and the colourful style of the late 1960s and 1970s in the popular cultural association that feeds retro interest.

Expo is a symbol of the modern, cosmopolitan aspirations of Montreal and Quebec. The style for this modernization was consciously imported with Scandinavian Modern furniture. The owner of le 1863 claims Montreal to be one of the places in the world with the most Scandinavian Modern furniture around, gathering interest from buyers all over the world, dating from the popularity of the style in the Expo years. A furniture shop named “Danish House” sold Danish design in a number of years after the Expo, and the Scandinavian furniture producers opened special facilities in Quebec. The Scandinavian Modern style was generally popular in North America in the 1950s and 1960s, being a more restrained alternative to the futuristic “populuxe” style. It was popular among the “upper-middle-class part of the market”, allowing its buyers to “feel that they were modern and respectful of the achievements of their own time and were purchasing honest, well-made furniture” (Hine 1986, 80). But its extraordinary success in Quebec could maybe be seen as enshrining the small Northern European countries as role models, with the purpose of creating a brand of modernity for a smaller country. The Scandinavian Modern style also offered an alternative to Americanness that was seen as a threat and as a vulgar and aggressive modernity. In any case it is a distinct feature of the Montreal Sixtiesness that forms the symbolic universe for the shops in Rue Amherst.

The retro shops on Rue Amherst form a distinct cluster. With their aesthetic presentation and supply, the Rue Amherst shops can be identified as part of a scene of retro culture different to that of the St. Laurent shops. The scene here is centered and formed around popular modernist design mainly from the 1950s and the 1960s. A specific relation between Montreal and modern design, especially Scandinavian Modern, is often expressed here with Expo 67 in particular and the liberation of the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s in general (including Montreal meeting the world, affluence, humanistic ideals expressed in modernist design). This forms a symbolic universe, present in the individual objects for sale in the shops, which is remarkably different from the selection in the St-Laurent shops, which are more likely to point



Expo memorabilia at Second Chance, rue Amherst. Photo: Kristian Handberg.

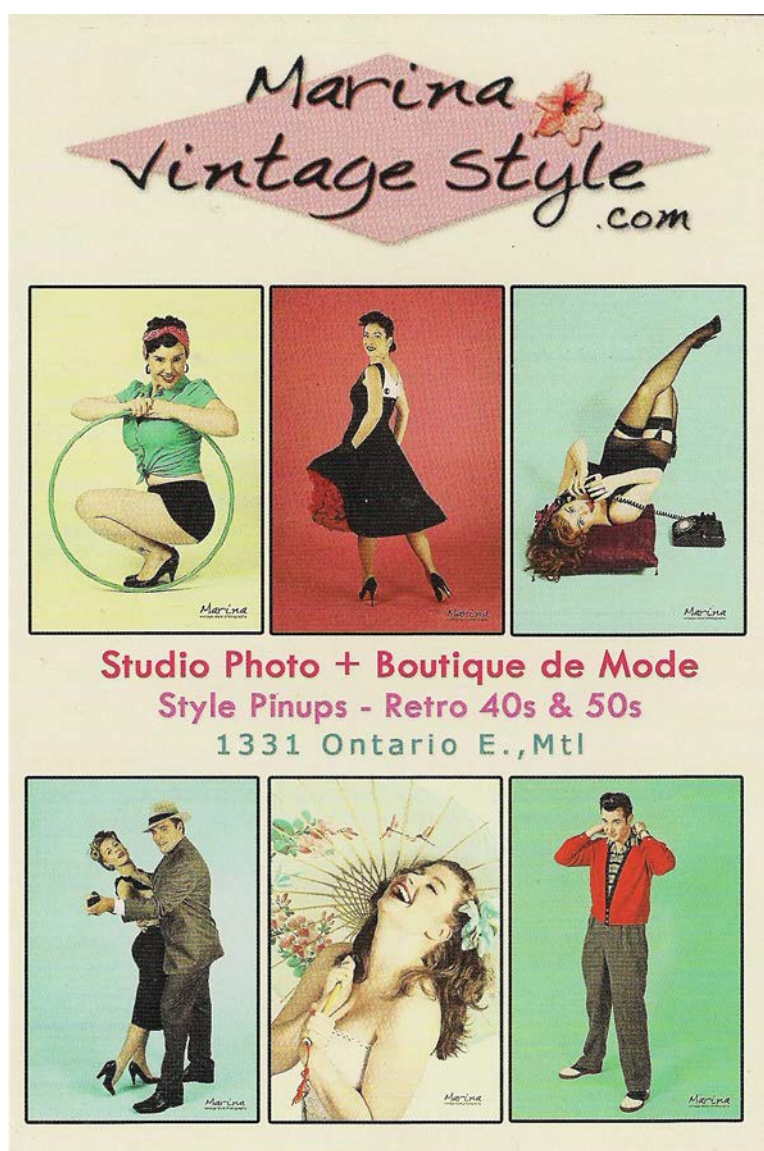
back to the more primitive sides of the past in the rural kitsch and the red light city of vice.

## Retro between Market and Memory

These visible presences bear witness to the current popularity of retro, which reaches beyond a small cult audience and an exchange of cheap anti-commodities. The shops in Rue Amherst in particular bear witness to retro's popularity among a new affluent audience and to the bigger investment in, and availability of, retro culture. This implies a different circulation of the retro objects, bringing them into affluent homes and the more established categories of fashion and taste. In this

way, they get closer to their original destination when they were newly-produced furniture in the 1960s aimed at the modern-oriented Quebec middle class. This is obviously a reorientation from the alternative cultural stance associated with retro.

Elsewhere in Montreal, the retro culture orients itself towards a rough, working-class inspired Fiftiesness. Marina Vintage Style, a new shop in the east of town not far away from Rue Amherst, not only sells newly produced 1940s and 1950s inspired dresses, but also offers styling and photographs in



Flyer for Marina Vintage Style. Montreal 2012.

this image. The offered styles are “Vintage Classic (40s or 50s chic), Pinup (pencil skirt or short with high heels), Vintage style swimsuit, Sexy Retro Lingerie, etc!” ([www.marinavintagestyle.com](http://www.marinavintagestyle.com)), and the prices are high (300 \$ + for dresses and for photo sets). This creates a combination of availability and dedication. This retro is ready-to-wear, far from the D.I.Y. practice previously associated with the retro style. But at the same time, Marina Vintage Style expresses a demand to be retro in a thorough and knowing way: not just wearing any dress connoting the 1950s, but exactly the right one – and to be professionally styled to wear it as well.

Marina Vintage Style is associated with the subcultural scene of rockabilly culture, which has a strong and dedicated following in Montreal. This scene makes itself visible in the city’s cultural landscape through regular events and festivals such as the Red, Hot and Blue Rockabilly Weekend, and is portrayed in the feature documentary *Rockabilly 514* (2008). This movie follows the musicians, festival organizers, car enthusiasts, burlesque dancers, and retro dealers through the scene’s events (most notably, the annual Red, Hot and Blue Rockabilly Weekend festival in the Montreal area), and their daily civil life. Through this, it portrays the “work” invested in the subculture (as Hebdige noted (1979)), and the many kinds of objects and practices involved. The scene is not just formed around one cultural practice such as rockabilly music, but also around the circulation of objects such as 1950s collectibles from cars to postcards, clothing self-sewn, vintage, or bought at the Marina Vintage Style – bodily practices such as tattoos, dancing, and styling and make-up, and the preference for special 1950s connoting places in the city’s geography such as the Tiki bar Jardin Tiki and the Orange Julep diner. A scene event will typically involve stalls with retro objects and clothing, styling and make-up sessions, 1950s themed food and drinks, dancing lessons and burlesque performances, besides the music.

Accordingly, one typical event “Rock around the Broc” (October 2012) offers a day-time section of retro market, photography, styling, vintage car show and dancing lessons, and evening section of concerts and dancing. The majority of the audience are dressed in 1950s and/or rockabilly style, clearly identifying with the subculture. Several of the St. Laurent retro shops such as Kitsch’n Swell are present with stalls, as well as the Marina Vintage shop, which offers styling and photo sessions. Like in the Kitsch’n Swell shop’s supply, markedly feminine and masculine objects dominate. There are flowered dresses and accessories such as costumed jewelry for the women, and vintage car merchandise, playboy magazines and leather jackets for the men. There are even “vintage Playboy photos” on offer. The rockabilly subculture is known for staging these gender images but mainly in a stylized manner, not intending any affiliation to the gender roles of the 1950s (see the interviews with Swedish rockabillies in Ekman 2007). The event is located in an old church hall deep in the Eastern Francophone part of town. Similarly, a concert with rockabilly artist Bloodshot Bill takes place in La Sala Rossa,



an old Hispanic community center in the same area. As such, the events are inscribed into a local geography, resonant with the images of the ruggish night club and church town of the 1950s.

These are multiple materializations of Fiftiesness, all contributing to a symbolic universe and an image of the past. Like Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire*, the material things, symbols, icons and stories, and practices, rituals and functions make up a unity "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (Nora 1989: 7). This is a desired image, "magical and affective", as Nora says (Nora 1989: 9), like the kinds of *Fiftiesness* developed through the revival culture as a specific mythical, nostalgic construction opposed to the historical time from 1950 to 1959 with all its social, political and cultural complexities (Sprengler 2009: 39). But it is not just a thought image: It does indeed involve a lot of *things* and other physicalities, like practices and places. Of course, these configurations of things are pieced together and selective, but they still do reflect certain specific conditions and ties to the cultural historical background of a place such as Montreal.

The retro shops in Montreal clearly do this through their location in the eastern part of town, i.e. in the Francophone working-class districts, as opposed to the wealthy Anglophone western part of town, or other parts of town dominated by other immigrant groups. These areas are laden with modern history, and in the remaining areas they connote something of the old working-class Montreal, even its colorful red-light nightlife. Retro fairs and festivals, and retro styled bars and cafes also inscribe themselves into this historically-laden context of *Montrealité*. Whether it is fully intentional or not, retro brings the recent past into current circulation with an amount of locality. This happens not least on a material level: There are local things in circulation and the culture is practiced in a specific geography. Thus retro culture expresses the local modern culture and its distribution and translations of global signs.

In this manner, the retro practices correspond to Orvar Löfgren's observations on modern material culture. Löfgren points to how national and cultural specificities in modern culture are felt not in indigenous traditions, but in variations in the globally distributed culture. These differences create identity as "cultural thickenings of belonging", "embedded in the materialities of everyday life" and "in the national trajectories of commodities" (Löfgren 1997: 106). This is not a static condition, but develops through the distribution, import and translation of things. As a result, "nationalization and internationalization are not polarized developments but parallel and interdependent ones" (Löfgren 1997: 109). I would argue that retro reflects this very well: The cultural thickenings of belonging in the regional variations of the modern culture are an important and overlooked aspect of retro, and this may be seen in the examples from Montreal. The constellation of retro objects found here would be different from the constellation of objects seen in Scandinavia or Great Britain, for instance.

Foreign influences are able to generate special local meanings and consequently to constitute modern identity. One example of a more exaggerated meaning of influence is the invasion of American popular culture in 1950s Montreal. According to sociologist Diane Pacom, “[a]cceptance of American influence by the urban working class doubled because of rejection of the rural masses and their traditional elites. The urban masses saw America’s influence as a tool of emancipation from the conservative ideological hold of that past. The rural masses and their elites, on the other hand, saw this as a negative, regressive influence that was evil, morally corrupt and, overall, dangerous to Quebec’s identity and cultural survivability”. (Pacom 2009: 441). Consciously or not, we may see the outspoken Americanité of the rockabilly universe as allied with the working-class Québécois, and both as opposing the officially promoted Québécois identity today that is still dominated by rural authenticity.

By expressing Americanness and urban Quebecity, the retro culture breaks with the officially promoted history and memory of Montreal. In *The City of Collective Memory* (1996) urban historian M. Christine Boyer marks a difference between the cultural memory and official musealization, and asks “how does the city become the locus of collective memory and not just simply an outdoor museum or a collection of historical districts?” (Boyer 1996: 16). According to Boyer, the contemporary “postmodern” city is dominated by the unidirectional focus of “the art of selling [which] now dominates urban space, turning it into a new marketplace for architectural styles and fashionable lives” (Boyer 1996: 65). The spectacle is the dominating image of this cityscape, offering a continuous stream of “fatuous images and marvelous scenes” (ibid.). This also involves the past, which is turned into the contemporary consumption and the booming musealization, as Andreas Huyssen also has analyzed (Huyssen 2003). The collective memory, however, is still “an antimuseum” here and “not localizable, certainly not appealed to through revisionary historic and popular landscapes proposed in the City of Spectacle”, (Boyer 1996: 68). The collective memory has the position of a counter memory to the governing culture. It has the ability to go against the tide of ruling visions, and keep other things present. While this distinction might not be without its uncertainties and problems (such as the static counter positioning of history and memory) it gives an understanding of retro as alternative memories not identifiable with the popular landscapes of the City of Spectacle.

Concerning the city’s memory-landscape, it is important to note that the described retro practices coexist with a wide range of other historicizing and musealizing practices spanning from official museums and governmental cultural manifestations to private memories and commemorations, and from mass media representations and commercial marketing to artistic representations of the past in an age that has been labelled the “memory boom”, where the “present pasts” have taken over from the “present futures” dominating modernist culture (Huyssen 2003). Retro contributes to this by reflecting on what is remembered as modern and at-



tracts the present imagination as a founding background for our present condition and a historical Other to our present selves. Retro oscillates between these poles of connecting identification and distancing exoticism with a fitting combination of nostalgia as well as irony.

## **Conclusion: Retro's Accents in Montreal**

The study of retro culture in Montreal shows a visible resonance with the mythologies of the modern past of Montreal and a presence of local connotations that create a special accent in the retro specific to this place. The Boulevard St.-Laurent shops and practices like the rockabilly culture tie themselves to the mythology of the 1950s past with its red lights, working-class neighborhoods, and local versions of *Americanité*, and the Amherst shops' use of 1960s modernism in the style of Scandinavian Modern creates an image of the more middle-class based modernity of the Expo 67 and Quiet Revolution years. These are obviously formative and important stages in Montreal's history, present and actively circulated in the city's collective memory. This modern era, however, is not the primary object of the official history and museum culture, which rather focuses on events of the distant past, like the 1812 war, and does not, for instance, feature an Expo museum. In this way, this historical phase belongs to collective memory rather than to the museum, according to Boyer's distinction. Retro practices include the lowly regarded modern Quebecité and recognizes its artifacts such as Yé-yé records as authentic and distinct works. The previous "wrongness" attached to Quebec's cultural products, seen as having neither the high cultural status of Europe, nor the popular appeal of the USA, is turned into distinction, making them sought-after and valuable. I am suggesting that this happens in an understanding of modern culture that corresponds to Löfgren's identification of cultural belonging as created in variations in the globally distributed modern culture rather than in indigenous traditions. This includes material objects as well as memories that get circulated at different levels of scenes – some local and others more far-reaching.

The presence of retro culture in Montreal confirms the general popularity of retro in contemporary Western culture, and expresses its recent developments such as popular accessibility and thorough specialization. This implies a challenge of the borders between cultural categories such as subculture and commercial culture, and levels of value such as that between cheap anti-commodities and valuable prestige objects. The expensive retro furniture sold in Rue Amherst and the newly sewn 1950s dresses sold in Marina Vintage Style are examples of this.

But at the same time the case shows retro as the primary representation of the postwar decades in contemporary culture, and as a main objective in the search for the hard-to-identify yet heavily debated Quebecité. This should modify the perception of retro as a random and superficial re-selling of the past not sensible to

specific contexts. Instead, retro reflects the combination of foreign and local provenance that characterizes the modern world, and how identity is created by its thing-world.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> One version says that is derived from a Scottish family "Keating" in Sainte-Hyacinthe for their impoverishment. Later it was popularized in the Radio Canada sitcom *Moi et l'autre* from 1966-1971 (Marshall 2001: 189).

<sup>2</sup> Interviews carried out during research in Montreal November 2012.

<sup>3</sup> About Montreal vintage shopping guide: <http://montreal.about.com/od/montreal-vintage/a/friperie-st-laurent-vintage-montreal.htm> (visited February 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Evelyn Reid: "Montreal Vintage. Shopping the scene", [http://montreal.about.com/od/montreal-vintage/ss/montreal-vintage-shopping-shops-stores-clothing-friperies\\_4.htm](http://montreal.about.com/od/montreal-vintage/ss/montreal-vintage-shopping-shops-stores-clothing-friperies_4.htm) (accessed February 2014).

<sup>5</sup> During my research I interviewed shop owners from all the mentioned shops in Rue Amherst, October and November 2012.

<sup>6</sup> The Quiet Revolution (révolution tranquille) refers to the changes in the 1960 in Quebec. Rather than being a specific event or a full-scale political revolution the "quiet revolution" contains several political and cultural developments bringing radical change to the province and its political and cultural status and self-understanding.

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## Other Sources

*Rockabilly 514* (movie, 86 min., Chica and Wafer, 2008). Feature documentary by Patricia Chica and Mike Wafer.

## Empirical resources (September to December 2012 in Montreal):

Cul-de-Sac, 3966 Boulevard Saint-Laurent, Montreal, Quebec.  
Friperie St-Laurent, 3976 Boulevard Saint-Laurent, Montreal, Quebec.  
Kitsch 'n' Swell, 3972 Boulevard Saint-Laurent, Montreal, Quebec  
(<http://kitschnswell.ca/en.html>).

Montrealité, 3960 Boulevard Saint-Laurent, Montreal, Quebec (<http://www.montrealite-tshirts.com/>)  
Rokokonut, 3972, Boulevard Saint-Laurent, Montreal, Quebec.  
Cité Déco Meubles, 1761 Rue Amherst, Montreal, Quebec (<http://www.redesignmobilier.com>)  
Jack's Objets et Mobiliers Moderne de XXe Siècle, 1883 Rue Amherst, Montreal, Quebec. (<http://www.jacks70.com>)  
Le 1863, 1863 Rue Amherst, Montreal, Quebec.  
Mtlmodern, 1851 Rue Amherst, Montreal, Quebec.  
PEI Mobilier Moderne 20e Siècle, 1023 Rue Ontario Est, Montreal Quebec.  
Re Design 1699 Rue Amherst, Montreal, Quebec.  
Seconde Chance, 1691 Rue Amherst, Montreal, Quebec.  
Marina Vintage Style Boutique & Pinup Photography 1331 Rue Ontario Est, Montreal Quebec (<http://vintagestylephoto.com/>).

## Events

Old Wig Vintage Fair October 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> 2012, Bain Mathieu, 2915 Rue Ontario Est, Montreal Quebec.  
Rock around the Broc (Rockabilly concert and fashion fair) October 27<sup>th</sup> 2012, 425 Beaubien, Montreal Quebec.  
Concert: Bloodshot Bill + Capitol Tease Burlesque + Lyse and the Hot Kitchen, La Salla Rossa, November 23<sup>th</sup>, 4848 Boulevard St. Laurent.